

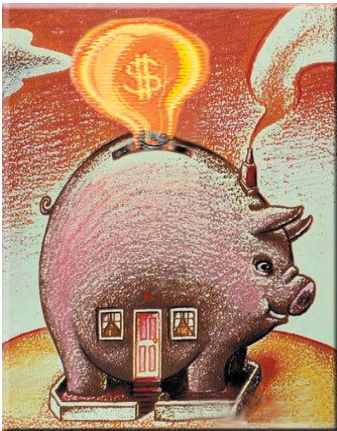
UTC News & Views

Budget Billing Available

If you get your natural gas or electricity from a company we regulate then you can arrange for an average monthly bill. "Budget Billing" is designed for customers who want to have consistent monthly bills.

What is Budget Billing?

Budget billing allows you to pay relatively the same amount every month and avoid seasonal variations.



How is the Billing Calculated?

Your energy company estimates how much you will pay this year based on last year's usage. You are then billed each month for one-twelfth of that amount.

Your company will review your budget payment every four months and adjust your payment to reflect any differences from what you actually used. At the end of the 12-month budget period, a "true-up" is done to make sure you pay only for the energy used.

What Companies Provide Budget Billing?

You can ask for budget billing if you get electricity or natural gas from one of the following companies: Avista Corporation, Cascade Natural Gas, Northwest Natural Gas, Pacific Power & Light and Puget Sound Energy.

If you receive service from a different provider, Public Utility District (PUD) or from a city, contact your provider to find out if it offers a similar budget billing program.

Lower Your Energy Bill

Winter is here and energy bills are climbing. To keep things warm in your home and money in your wallet, think about doing the following:

- Lower your thermostat by one degree – you will use 7 percent less energy.
- Wear a sweater and set your thermostat between 65 to 72 degrees.
- Lower your hot water heater thermostat to 120 degrees.
- Wash clothes with cold water.
- Take cooler and shorter showers.
- Only wash full loads of dishes and clothes.
- Air dry your dishes.
- When using your clothes dryer, throw in one or two dry towels – it speeds drying!
- Once you're done baking, turn off the oven and open the door to let the excess heat into the house.

Check out more ideas on The Energy Ideas Clearinghouse web site:

<http://www.energyideas.org>

Cleaning Saves Energy

Did you know a clean house can save you money?



Dirty furnaces, appliances and fixtures must work harder and use more energy to do their jobs.

Keeping your home and its contents clean helps those energy eaters run more efficiently. So roll up those sleeves and get out the mop and bucket!

- Banish dust bunnies. Clean the lint trap in your dryer after every load and make sure the dryer hose and vent are clear.

- Change your furnace filter monthly. The dust bunnies which escape your dusting will end up clogging your furnace.
- Clean the coils on your refrigerator and freezer so they run more efficiently.

Keep the reflectors under your stove's heating elements and your oven walls clean. A clean stove and oven reflects more heat.

Check out more ideas on the WSU Cooperative Extension Energy program web site:

<http://www.energy.wsu.edu/>



Washington Telephone Assistance Program

A telephone is a lifeline to essential services. In times of financial stress some households can find it difficult to maintain

phone service. Loss of phone service can threaten a household's well being.

The state of Washington, the federal government and your local telephone company manage a program that helps maintain phone service for financially-stressed households. The Washington Telephone Assistance Program (WTAP) helps people acquire phone service by reducing the basic monthly charge.

Who is eligible?

Adults who receive financial or medical assistance from the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) are eligible for WTAP. Programs include but are not limited to: Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), Food Stamps, General Assistance, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Medical Assistance, Refugee Assistance, DSHS Chore Services, and Community Options Program (COPES).

What WTAP offers

For those who already have telephone service or would like to get it, WTAP provides the following:

Free basic installation - WTAP, combined with a matching federal program, will cover the cost of starting phone service, provided there is a phone line already available to your home. This benefit is available no more than once per physical service address.

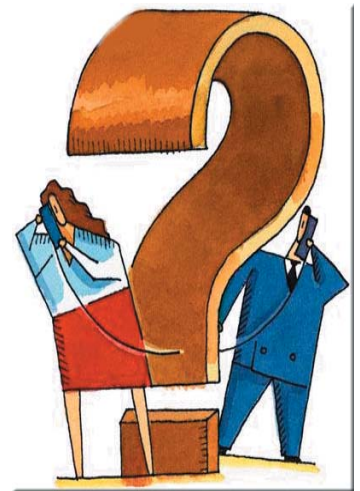
Waiver of the deposit - WTAP will waive any deposit requirements for local service. However, a deposit may be required at a later date if you fall behind on your bill. This benefit is available only once per year.

Low monthly rate - WTAP caps the amount a customer pays for local phone service. The current cap is \$8 a month. Customers must pay applicable taxes, fees and full price for all other telephone services, such as long-distance toll calls, voicemail, Caller ID and Call Waiting, etc.

Community Voicemail - For those who do not have a way to receive traditional phone service, WTAP supports a program, available through community action agencies, which provides clients with a phone number, voice mailbox and an access code.

How to get WTAP service

To sign up for WTAP, contact your local telephone company. Have your DSHS client identification number on-hand. The telephone company will verify your eligibility with DSHS. All information you supply is confidential. Benefits begin on the date of application.



Restrictions on WTAP support

WTAP applies only to residential, local telephone service. Only one telephone line per house is allowed under the program. The billing name must match the name of the person who qualifies for the program. You will have to pay full price for long-distance calls and special features such as Call Forwarding and Call Waiting.

Tribal Lifeline and Link-Up Programs

Eligible persons residing on a federally-recognized reservation can receive enhanced federal lifeline service that lowers the local phone rate to \$1 plus taxes and fees. The customer also may receive up to \$130 in credit for connecting a phone line. To qualify for enhanced lifeline, you must inform the phone company that you are a resident on a federally-recognized reservation.

How WTAP works

After WTAP determines a customer is eligible to participate, the program compensates the local telephone company directly for the discounts a participant receives.

Who pays for the program?

WTAP works in coordination with a federal program. The state portion comes from a legislative authorized charge on every telephone line in the state of Washington. This charge is capped at 14 cents a month. The actual amount varies from year-to-year depending on program demand. The federal program is supported by fees paid by long-distance telephone companies.

How to contact the program

Call the program's toll-free number
1-888-700-8880.

Cramming: Mystery Phone Charges

"Cramming." No, we're not talking about studying for an exam, although you may want to study your monthly phone bill more closely in the future. Cramming is unwanted charges on your phone bill for services you never ordered, gave permission for, received, or used. Because these charges are included in your phone bill, you might not even realize you are paying for these services.



Cramming schemes

Most of these scams occur through the use of a toll-free number, like 1-800. Others are initiated by contests or sweepstakes. Most are deceptive, and you should dispute the charges. Here are some common ways the charges appear on your bill.

- **1-800 and other toll free Number Calls.** You call an 800 number advertised as a free date line, psychic line or other entertainment service. A recording prompts you to give your name and to say "I want the service," or some similar phrase, to get the advertised free service. You are automatically enrolled in a club or service program. The number you have called has captured your phone number and will bill you for the service through your local phone bill.
- **Contest Entry Forms.** You fill out a contest entry form. The form includes in small print, permission to bill your local phone number. You may never get the service -- just the bills.
- **Direct Mail Sweepstakes.** You receive a sweepstakes contest invitation in the mail that tells you to dial an 800 number or other toll free number to claim your prize. When you dial the number, you hear a recording of some kind. Later, a charge appears on your phone bill.

Don't get crammed

Here are some tips to help you avoid cramming scams:

- Be aware that your local phone company may include in its regular bill charges for services provided by other companies.
- Carefully read the fine print before you fill out contest forms. Likewise, read the fine print before you place a call in response to a sweepstakes promotion.
- Be cautious about calling unfamiliar 1-800 numbers.
- 1-900 numbers also cost money, even if you're calling to claim a "free" prize.
- Consider a 1-900 number block; it stops calls from going through. Call your local phone company for details.
- Check your phone bill every month for unfamiliar charges. Dispute the charge(s) if you believe they are incorrect.
- Examine your phone bill for recurring monthly charges. These charges typically appear as "Miscellaneous Charges and Credits." Your bill will list who to call or write to dispute the charge. Follow up any phone conversations with a letter, sent by certified mail, return receipt requested. That's your proof that the company received your letter. Keep a copy for your files.

Where to Complain

First contact the telephone company, information provider, or billing agent whose toll-free number

is listed on your phone bill.

If you call, follow up with a letter. Remember your local telephone company cannot disconnect your phone service while you are disputing some charges. Except for the charges you dispute, you must continue to pay the charges that are not in dispute.



You also should consider contacting your state Attorney General's office (AG) and the Federal Trade Commission. Most AG's offices have programs that deal primarily with consumer protection issues. Check the government section of your phone book or contact your local or state consumer office for the phone number and address of your state AG's office. You can also link to the websites of the AG's offices of many states from the [National Association of Attorneys General website \(http://www.naa.org/\)](http://www.naa.org/)

For more information about cramming, call the Federal Trade Commission's Cramming Information Line at (202) 326-3134.



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